

September 28, Ordinary 26C (1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31)

Preachers often bury the lede—especially with this parable.

by [Jon Mathieu](#) in the [September 2025](#) issue

I'm new to the magazine business, but I have long been familiar with the concept of “burying the lede”: a journalistic error that occurs when a writer ought to start off an article with the most salient content but instead incorporates it later in the piece. Information that ought to be front and center, captivating readers in the introductory lede, is—usually by mistake—buried among secondary details.

It's not just news writers who commit this foul. Anyone who wants to inform people about anything must consider how to effectively sequence their disclosures and descriptions. I've heard many a casual conversationalist (myself included) reprimanded for telling a life update in the wrong order: *You really buried the lede there.*

In my years as an evangelical Christian, preachers were some of the most prolific lede-buriers. And perhaps no passage's lede was as hidden, obscured, or outright banished as that of this week's reading from Luke. Even its genre was buried—we read this parable, or parable-like story, as a literal report of a historical event. Then whoever was preaching that week would get to work dissecting every detail about Hades. He'd puzzle over the fact that communication is apparently possible between the cosmic realms, but not travel. He would quote commentaries on “Abraham's bosom” (a phrase that appears in the King James rendering of v. 22).

The sermon would crescendo in an urgent altar call, lest we face the same irreversible damnation as Luke's rich man. Perhaps most disturbing, there would often be a certain smugness about the man's fate: like the wicked non-Christians of our own day, he is to blame for his torment, because he failed to repent during his earthly lifetime.

It was only in passing, if at all, that we would face the gutting horror that is the lede of Jesus' story: a sore-covered man dying of starvation on the doorstep of someone in fancy clothes, someone for whom every meal is a feast.

This enraging callousness, this unjust distribution of wealth, is Jesus' lede, and not just rhetorically but also ethically and theologically: it is the reason Abraham provides to the rich man for why the two are separated by a chasm. *Remember miserable Lazarus? Remember how good you had it?* We who have the benefit of reading the other gospels might recall Jesus' remarks just after his own conversation with a different rich man: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom! . . . Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Mark 10:17–31).

Whether by divine providence or the mysterious magic of two unrelated lectionary tracks aligning, Luke's lede is notably unburied in the context of this week's readings: it's paired with the diatribe against “the love of money” in 1 Timothy 6. The author of 1 Timothy describes two possible paths for those with upward mobility. They can seek to become rich, a path riddled with temptation and ending only in pain and destruction. Or they can put their money to use for good, becoming intentionally less rich in financial wealth in order to become richer in generosity and sharing. This path leads to life, “the life that really is life.”

Binaries like the ones in these passages can be helpful when they provide a clear sense of choices and consequences. The rich man in purple linens can walk outside and help Lazarus or feast all the way to flames and torment. The rich young ruler can follow Jesus' final instruction or walk away sad. The readers of 1 Timothy can seek riches unto their own ruin or become rich in good deeds unto eternal life. Yet binaries rarely capture the complexity that is our habitat. The divergent paths in these texts sound so different that it's hard to imagine course correcting from one to the other. And what about someone who sometimes seeks their own wealth but sometimes yields to their better angels?

Terry Parsons, who used to direct stewardship programs for the Episcopal Church, notes in a sermon that as a person gains money over the course of their life, a transition takes place: they are able to stop simply using their money to meet their basic needs, instead choosing how to spend it on their wants. (This, of course, is not everyone's journey with finances, but it is a common one, in Parsons's circles and in mine.) In sufficient quantities, money becomes a sort of litmus test about what our hearts most desire.

Many of the wants we might spend money on are exactly those temptations 1 Timothy warns us about—vain pursuits that rob us of true life. But, Parsons notes, both sides of the binary are shaped by desire: "Throughout his ministry it becomes abundantly clear that Jesus hopes our *want* will be to satisfy the needs of others." Because all of our spending flows out of the deep desires of our heart, it won't do to read these passages with simple behavior modification mantras in mind: "I'm going to be more generous." Not even if we tack on something horrid like, "or else I'll go to hell." Instead we need to read them with the vulnerability of an open heart. We need to feel Lazarus's pain, to see his sores, if we are ever to lay down our purple linens. Lazarus's plight is, after all, Jesus' lede.